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ABSTRACT

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# The Photographic Self Concept of Persons in Transition

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Abstract

A phenomenological approach to the study of the self concept using photography was utilized in a counseling situation. The clients were asked to take or have taken 12 photographs in reply to "Who are you"? Clients in comparison with controls presented significantly ($p < .05$) more photographs of the past and of their family but significantly fewer photographs of themselves, activities and books. The photographic self concept permits the counselor to perceive the perceiver (the counselee) and provides additional information for understanding persons under conditions of transition.

The Photographic Self Concept of Persons in Transition

Rogers (1951) viewed the task of counseling as the expansion of self awareness by enabling the client to experience him or herself more fully in the present. Rogers emphasized the importance of the counselor's ability to perceive the internal reference of each client. Without this empathic understanding it is proposed that the client will remain unaware of his present organismic experience.

Jourard (1964) points to the importance of self disclosure to significant others as a means of experiencing the self. He discussed the ability to self disclose as a fundamental concept for client and therapist in order to help the client move toward a healthy self concept. It is proposed that the counseling process is facilitated if the counselor can experience the phenomenal field of the client.

A phenomenological utilization of photographs has been developed by Ziller, et al. (Ziller, 1975; Ziller & Smith, in press) which operationalizes the orientations of Rogers and Jourard. In this approach, the perceiver is perceived through photographs by the perceiver not of the perceiver. It is proposed that the photographs are images of the photographer's information processing and traces his interaction with the physical and social environment. For example, in one study photographs taken by college students permanently confined to a wheel chair were compared with those taken by a control group. Among the findings, it was observed that the photographs of persons confined to wheel chairs showed fewer eye contacts between the photographer (the person in the wheel chair) and persons in the photographs (Ziller & Smith, in press). In the present study the photographic approach is extended to the study of the

self concept of counselees and controls. The subjects are asked to describe who they are by taking (or have taken) 12 photographs.

Among the first to use the "Who are you"? approach to the study of the self concept were Bugental and Zelen (1950). Their approach was to provide the respondent with a blank piece of paper and ask him/her to give three answers to the question "Who are you"? Kuhn and McPartland (1954) refined this approach and used it more widely. The present approach is a further refinement through the medium of photography.

With the camera, the client can become a more active participant in the process of self disclosure. The task is open ended and encourages creativity in defining one's self concept nonverbally. The client focuses on making manifest in images, how he/she perceives his/her own experience. In making a photographic statement, the possibilities are increased for greater self awareness. It was proposed that the self concepts of those seeking counseling would differ in significant ways from those people not seeking counseling assistance. In addition, the utility of the approach in counseling was explored.

## Method

### Subjects

Twenty-two students from the University of Florida participated as volunteers in the study. Eleven students (5 females and 6 males) were counselees at the University clinic and eleven students matched for age and sex were members of an introductory social psychology class. The counseling subjects were all the clients of the first author over two college terms excluding those whose stated purpose was vocational counseling and three subjects who declined using the approach.

Photographic Equipment

Each person was provided with an instamatic camera and a twelve picture roll of black and white film.

Procedure

The following instructions were given to each student:

"Place yourself in this situation. You are sending a series of twelve photographs one by one through the mail to someone you will meet in two weeks. You want to give a true impression of yourself. I want you to take, or have taken, a series of photographs. I also want to know the order in which you plan to send them, so when they are developed number them from one to twelve, making the first photograph to be sent with a one. The subject of the photographs can be anything you choose, as long as you think it is communicating something about who you are. I am not interested in your photographic skills. The photographs are only a way of communicating nonverbally who you are."

Each student in the counseling and non-counseling situation discussed their photographs with one of the authors. In the counseling situation the photographs were utilized as a therapeutic technique for clarification of the self concept.

The photographs taken by the counseled group were compared with those taken by the non-counseled group using nine categories. These same categories were used in earlier research by the second author following a phenomenological analysis of 90 sets of photographic self concepts of college students (see Ziller & Smith, in press). Each group was given a percentage score for each category according to the number of photographs in which they had included: pictures of self, pictures of self and other, pictures of others, pictures of family, pictures from the past, pictures of activities, pictures of books,

pictures of significant others (friends, spouse), and pictures of animals. If the subject included one or more photographs involving books, a score of one was assigned. If no books were included, a score of 0 was assigned. The photographs were scored independently by the authors. The two scores were consistent 95 percent of the time. Inconsistencies were reconciled through discussion. The activities category presented the only disagreement. Those photographs classified as "activity" included pictures involving sports, musical instruments, chess, parties, sewing, painting, cooking, biking, and gardening.

## Results

The results of the Chi-Squared and Fisher's exact test (Hays, 1973, p. 738) analysis are presented in Table 1. The counseled groups' photographs are significantly different from the non-counseled groups' photographs on five of the nine dimensions at the .05 level of confidence. The counseled group presented significantly more pictures of the past and of their families. They presented significantly less photographs of self, activities and books.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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## Discussion

The study explored nine facets of photographic self presentation. The data illustrate that students in counseling present different facets of self image than do other students. Half of the counseled group included a photograph of him or herself. In contrast, the non-client group presented a photograph of self in every instance. This could be interpreted in several ways. First, the client group expressed verbally a feeling of self consciousness and inadequacy

about their personal appearance. This feeling was not voiced in the non-client group. This may contribute to a lack of self esteem in the client group who do not accept their physical appearance. The photographic approach to the self concept facilitates this communication.

Two other facets of client self concept that were significantly different from the non-client group were the choice of family photographs and photographs from the past. In the non-client group, not one person included any photographs in either of these categories in his or her photographic self concept. The client group may have been experiencing difficulties in defining themselves in terms other than that of a family self identity; that is, they may have been experiencing difficulty in making the transition from the family setting. Laing and Esterson (1964) have discussed the problems that may develop within an individual if they cannot find a sense of self outside the family nexus.

A need to return to the past may characterize the individual in transition. Mueller (1973) has noted that a client who is experiencing conflict may seek a less conflicted mode of experiencing such as reliving past conflicts with others.

In contrast to the emphasis on the family and the past by clients, lack of emphasis was observed concerning activities and books. Only 27 percent of the client group included these categories in their photographic self concept. The non-client group included these 81 percent of the time. Subjects in the non-client group described their self images in terms of activities such as swimming, tennis, biking, and studying. The client group presented remarkably few activities of this kind as being associated with the self image. Since a college environment usually includes a variety of these activities, these data suggest that the client group is alienated. Perhaps, again, these clients are experiencing difficulty in transition from the home to the college environment.

Or more generally, the client group is under conflict and stress which leads to a more closed and less active participation in their present environment. Some turn to the past for orientation, and of course, all have recourse to a counselor. Perhaps it is the future that is one of the significant difficulties, or a time orientation in general.

The significant differences in the photographic self concepts of clients and controls, attest to the validity of the approach and its broad utility as a research technique. The photographic self concept is a nonverbal approach which enables others to perceive the perceiver, to see others as others see themselves. It can lead to an improved understanding of a wide variety of groups and persons as was previously demonstrated (Ziller & Smith, in press). In addition, however, the utility of the approach in counseling is suggested.

In one case, for example, the client seemed to present many of the photographs common to the control group. A closer inspection of the photograph showed no books, no photographs of his wife, and a number of photographs from the past including a photograph of his mother and grandmother whom he visited weekly. The emerging theme was difficulty with the present social environment and an attempt to emphasize continuity with the past. Using the photographs as stimulus materials with the client as a partner in the inquiry can lead to increased empathic understanding and to the delineation of the internal references of the client.

The approach in contrast to some other approaches to personality measures also provides opportunities for the client to present a positive view of himself, partially perhaps, because the photographs involve the more multi-faceted environment of the client outside the office walls of the counselor.

A large number of questions remain to be answered. How can the photographic self concept approach be utilized in a counseling setting? How is the counselor's perception of the client and the client's perceptions of the counselor altered when the photographic self concept is employed? What are the characteristics of clients who avoid using the approach? Under what circumstances is communication between the client and the counselor facilitated through the photographic self concept approach?

It is clear, however, that the approach has several advantages. The client is able to represent himself in any framework he pleases; the approach is simple; there is a quality of "rich revealingness" about hte self presentation, and at the same time some of the usual shortcomings of verbal responses are avoided. As Kelly suggests (1955, p. 268), "If a test can be arranged to produce a kind of protocol which can be subjected to a meaningful analysis, independent of words, we shall have made progress toward a better understanding of the client's personal constructs."

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Table 1

Client and Non-Client Difference in Self Presentation[a]

| | Client Group | Non-Client Group | $X^2$ | Fisher's Exact Test | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Family | .36 | .00 | 4.88 | | .05 |
| Self | .54 | 1.00 | | .0175 | |
| Other Person | .90 | 1.00 | 1.05 | | NS |
| Past | .36 | .00 | | .045 | |
| Self and Other | .18 | .45 | 1.88 | | NS |
| Activities | .27 | .81 | 6.6 | | .025 |
| Animals | .27 | .36 | .20 | | NS |
| Books | .27 | .72 | 4.56 | | .05 |
| Significant Other | .45 | .72 | 1.7 | | NS |

Note.--The significance of the differences were tested by Chi-Squared for all categories with the exceptions of "self" and "past." In the latter cases the test used was Fisher's exact test (Hays, 1973, p. 738) because of the low expected frequencies.